Patrick White and the path to Sarsaparilla: How a great novelist became a great unread

MARTIN THOMAS

The 'Patrick White Australia Policy'

'Your sense of permanence is perverted', wrote Patrick White in *The Aunt's Story*. 'True permanence is a state of multiplication and division'.[1] The words are prescient, for White himself has done rather well at dissolving into the impermanence of post-mortem obscurity. Perhaps unsurprisingly in view of the pandemic, the thirtieth anniversary of his death in 2020 left little imprint. No literary festival honoured the occasion, and no journal did a special issue. If White is looking down at us from some gumtree in the sky, he will be bathing in the lack of glory. He despised the hacks of the 'Oz lit' industry as much as he loathed the 'academic turds from Canberra'.[2]

As one of those unmentionables from the Australian capital, perhaps I should hold my tongue. But I can't help thinking that the absence of Patrick White for more than three decades is something to care about, if only to understand how a writer of his intelligence and standing became a 'great unread'. The situation is hardly new. As far back as 2006, White's stocks had fallen to the extent that a journalist, writing under the name 'Wraith Picket', could type out a chapter from White's novel *The Eye of the Storm* and submit it as an unsolicited manuscript to a dozen agents and publishers in Australia.[3] Despite the anagrammatic hint in the nom de plume, no-one recognised the work as White's and no-one considered it worthy of publication.

Things have certainly changed since the 1970s when the buzz around the newly minted Nobel laureate was such that the writer Barbara Blackman could protest that a 'Patrick White Australia Policy' gripped the nation. This stirred the old possum who dubbed her 'Barbara Blackmail' thereafter.[4]

White's searing wit, which had a delicious way of pirouetting into high bitchiness, is one reason why he is still worth reading. His comic brilliance is fully evident in his works for theatre, as it is in his letters, which he later urged recipients to destroy.

1 Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982): 284.
2 Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 21.
3 David Malouf, 'Patrick White Reappraised', *Age*, 27 January 2007, www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/patrick-white-reappraised-20070127-ge42xi.html.
4 David Marr, ed., *Patrick White Letters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 473.

Of course they didn't! Accessing this aspect of the White oeuvre is easy. While researching White in the 1980s, David Marr unearthed more than enough letters to fill a large volume. Published by Jonathan Cape, it is a fine companion to Marr's definitive biography, *Patrick White: A Life*.

Marr is one person for whom the thirtieth anniversary did not slip by unnoticed. He threw a dinner party, bringing together surviving veterans from White's inner circle. The house on Martin Road in Sydney's Centennial Park, where White spent the last third of his life, had been a gathering place for a talented crowd of younger friends, many from the theatre world. Kerry Walker, Jim Sharman, Neil Armfield and Kate Fitzpatrick were regulars, and they sometimes appear in photos by William Yang, who doubled as both court photographer and guest. Marr came to know White well during the years he worked on the biography. As the book makes clear, White could be a control freak of a high order. He famously warned editors never to change a comma. But in allowing Marr to write the book, White granted him complete artistic freedom. This would be an 'unauthorised' biography, albeit one that was aided and abetted by its subject.

Authorising his biographer

White made a shrewd decision in giving his support to Marr who was prominent as a journalist and former editor of the *National Times*, an influential weekly from the Fairfax stable, now long defunct, that broke some big corruption scandals in the 1980s. Marr had already proved his mettle as a biographer, having written a life of the controversial chief justice, Sir Garfield Barwick. That he was a professional wordsmith, *not* an academic, was very much in his favour from White's point of view.

The biography is a compassionate and yet forensic examination. White's privileged origins, his lifelong health problems relating to asthma, and the great scope of his artistic vision are captured masterfully. So too is his capacity for terrible rage and cruelty: to his own family; to the 'friends' he discarded when they ceased to be useful; and—on occasion—to his life partner, Manoly Lascaris.

White, who lived to see Marr's manuscript but not the published book, did not contest the sometimes harrowing portrait it painted. He did, however, demand a final pound of flesh from his biographer, as Marr recounted when I interviewed him for a short podcast.[5] After receiving his copy of the manuscript, he summoned an extremely nervous Marr to Martin Road. Marr expected he would deliver judgement on the spot. But it was not so simple. Instead, White required Marr to sit with him at the dining table while he read it in front of him from beginning to end.

5 David Marr, interview by author, 2021, accessed 10 July 2023, soundcloud.com/user-728173421/patrick-white-in-london.

The reading went on for days. It's a big book. Along the way, White sometimes laughed uproariously, often at his own witticisms. Sometimes he challenged the syntax or a factual detail. Marr laughs about it now, but at the time it was excruciating. He also acknowledges that it was an amazing gift.

Marr pointed out in the interview that his own trajectory intersected with White's at an early age. As a child his family had friends who were close neighbours of White and Lascaris. At that time the couple lived in a house called Dogwoods in the township of Castle Hill, then on the outer edge of Sydney. Marr never met them as a kid, but he remembers the house on Showground Road (a wonderful address for a man so fond of glitter and greasepaint).[6] Castle Hill was the inspiration for the imaginary locality of Sarsaparilla, a bedraggled backwater of outer suburbia, studded with unpromising place names like Terminus Road and Barranugli. White populated this topography with gossips and busybodies—bastions of the ordinary—who are counterposed by the motley and often taciturn ensemble of misfits and eccentrics who live in their midst. Sarsaparilla is the setting for many of White's stories including the book that made him, *The Tree of Man* (1955).

At Castle Hill, White and Lascaris lived quietly, as camp couples did in the 1950s. Not only was Lascaris queer, but he was a 'new Australian' (the word 'immigrant' requiring a euphemism in those years). The emotional scars of the war, streaked by a strong sense of survivor's guilt, haunted him for the remainder of his life. These wounds were personified in the memory of a German soldier, a beautiful blond man with 'porcelain skin … naked against the setting sun over the Red Sea', with whom he had an affair in 1934. [7] The soldier subsequently wrote to him, begging for assistance in getting out of Germany. Not realising the horror of the situation there, Lascaris paid little heed to the request. He never heard from the man again and forever after carried the shame of having failed to help him.

Lascaris explained to the academic and translator Vrasidas Karalis that he 'escaped to Patrick and Australia because there was so much death around me, so much darkness. I wanted a place without my memories.'[8] Whether Australia—or anywhere else for that matter—could have delivered on that front is doubtful. But the new country *did* give him plenty he could never forget. This was the time when Prime Minister Robert Menzies was hunting reds with McCarthyite zeal. The true White Australia policy was still in full swing, bringing untold misery to the First Australians.

6 Marr, interview.

7 Vrasidas Karalis, 'Mr Manoly Lascaris, Twenty Years Later', *Top Paddock*, 16 June 2021, www.kcl.ac.uk/mr-manoly-lascaris-twenty-years-later.

8 Karalis, 'Mr Manoly Lascaris'.

The lure of the land

Half a century later, Lascaris told Karalis about how, in the fifties, he had to go to a pharmacy to buy olive oil.[9] It's a bizarre detail, but in a way it says it all. Australian provincialism and insularity were highly mysterious to this cosmopolitan and philosophically minded Greek whose family had lived for generations in Alexandria. It was there that he and White met as servicemen during the war.

After being demobbed they had drifted around the Mediterranean, eventually deciding to settle in Australia. The idea appealed to Lascaris. Quite apart from his yearning to escape the residue of Europe's recent horrors, he knew that his Greek relatives would never tolerate him living openly with a male partner, which is what he and White had decided to do. After moving to Australia and acquiring the small holding on Showground Road, the couple tried to be self-sufficient, growing fruit and vegetables, milking the cow and making butter, selling cut flowers. They were passionate dog breeders who are credited with reintroducing the Schnauzer to Australia.[10] Only at night, when his labour on the land was done, did White pick up the pen. This was an eccentric career path for a man born to a pastoral empire. His family were among the richest graziers in the country, but here he was on a lot of six acres, pursuing some oddball variation on the official soldier settler schemes.

Marr regards White's decision to make his home in Australia as both courageous and unexpected. To stay in Europe would have been an obvious choice for someone of his talent, connections and independent wealth. (His inheritance from his father was sufficient to ensure he would never need a paying job.) By 1941, White had published his second novel and begun to make his name in London where he spent the greater part of the thirties. In New York, his career was going equally well. At Viking he had caught the attention of Ben Huebsch, the US publisher of James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Stephan Zweig and other greats. Huebsch acquired the American rights to both of White's novels and was eager to publish more. After the end of the war, the world was pretty much White's oyster, but by this time he could not resist 'a longing to return to the wells of childhood, which is, after all, the purest well from which the creative artist draws'.[11] He thought he would at least give Australia a try and 'see what I should find other than the landscapes which had never left me'.[12]

9 Vrasidas Karalis, *Recollections of Mr Manoly Lascaris* (Blackheath: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2008), 19.
10 David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), 272.
11 Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', in *Patrick White Speaks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 14.
12 White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 127.

Figure 1: Patrick White and Manoly Lascaris, Martin Road.

Source: Photograph by William Yang (1989). Courtesy of the National Library of Australia and the artist, nla.gov.au/nla.obj-152639200.

When White and Lascaris were putting down roots at Castle Hill, droves of artists and intellectuals were heading in the opposite direction. There are many reasons why so many Australians left at that time—the conservatism, materialism, distance from everywhere else and sheer cultural barrenness are often mentioned. Menzies's success in staying in power, aided by the anti-communist split within the Australian Labor Party, brought despair to many on the left. The continuing exodus from Australia, which lasted through to the sixties, resulted in the permanent departure of talents as diverse as Michael Blakemore, Carmen Callil, Randolph Stow, Clive James, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, John Pilger and Germaine Greer. White fully understood the persuasiveness of these 'push factors', but his response to them was very different. He took ownership of them, exploring and interpreting them in his prose. The uncertainty of the European foothold in Australia, the sense of fragility and spiritual vacuity that resulted, became one of the great themes of White's fiction. He later explained his writing as an attempt to 'people the Australian emptiness'.[13]

13 White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 44.

The 'push power' of a seemingly desolate culture in Australia cannot be separated from the 'pull' of Europe, which White himself felt strongly throughout his life, despite his growing reputation as the de facto 'novelist laureate' of Australia, a status almost formalised by his being awarded the Nobel prize in 1973. The citation described him as the creator of an 'epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature'.[14]

White, ever the iconoclast, told the press on the day the prize was announced that, while his blood was Australian, he felt himself a Londoner 'at heart'.[15] Jingoism unnerved him deeply, especially in view of the continuing injustice suffered by Indigenous Australians. He described himself variously as a 'dubious Australian' and as 'a foreigner in my own country'.[16] Somewhat surprisingly, he accepted the award of Australian of the Year in 1973, although he noted in his acceptance speech that 'Australia Day is for me a day of self-searching rather than trumpet blowing'.[17] In private he was more candid, confiding to an old friend that being Australian was rather like having 'a hump or a clubfoot: one has to put up with it'.[18]

London calling

White was serious when he described himself as a Londoner. He was born there in 1912 while his parents were making an extended visit to the imperial capital, as colonials of their wealth and class were inclined to do. In explaining White's great affinity with London, Marr points out that he had 'a slightly guilty faith in the stars'.[19] As his birthplace, he felt that London had marked him for life, even though the family sailed for Sydney when he was just six months old.

Much of his childhood was spent at Lulworth, a mansion near Sydney Harbour that he would use as a setting in several books, most memorably in *The Vivisector* where the luxuriant monstera deliciosa in the garden becomes a 'delicious monster' in the impressionable mind of young Hurtle Duffield. Visits to family properties, an important thread in White's early life, were his induction to the landscapes that never left him, even after his parents took him back to Britain in 1925, this time to get young 'Paddy', as they called him, settled into an English public school, which his mother thought superior to the Australian imitations. They enrolled him at Cheltenham College in Gloucestershire where, as he later wrote in his author bio, '"it was understood the climate would be temperate and a colonial acceptable". Neither proved true'.[20]

14 'Patrick White', The Nobel Prize, accessed 12 August 2023, www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1973/press-release/.

15 Patrick White, interview, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1973, cited in David Marr, 'White's London', in *Patrick White beyond the Grave*, ed. Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang (London: Anthem Press, 2015), 67.

16 White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 43.

17 Patrick White, 'Australian of the Year' in *Patrick White Speaks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 47.

18 White to Pepe Mamblas, 1973, cited in Marr, 'White's London', 67.

19 Marr, interview.

20 White, *The Aunt's Story*, 1.

White was a thin, asthmatic homosexual who detested sport. At Cheltenham he was bullied unmercifully, and he loathed the very mention of the place forever after. Holidays brought relief in the form of visits to London where he indulged his love of theatre and dreamed of writing plays. He subsequently returned to Australia where he had a gap year in reverse, jackerooing at properties owned by family and friends.

That period of stockwork and horsemanship, a rite of passage for a young man of his background, reinvigorated his connection with the bush and revealed to all concerned that Patrick had no future in the family business. But it did provide raw material for his first published novel, *Happy Valley*. By the time it came out in 1939, White had been back in England for several years. After studying French and German at Cambridge, he moved to London where he lived at various addresses on and around Ebury Street, close to Belgravia but closer still to the less salubrious Victoria Station. In those years it was something of a Bohemian quarter. Marr laments that, for all the blue plaques in London connecting famous people with buildings, White's years in the city have not been officially recognised. If ever he gets his plaque, it will be at 13 Eccleston Street, the address where he lived longest. There, more than anywhere else, he ingested the modernist influences that shaped him as a stylist.

His exposure to modern literature at that time was inevitably important, but that strand of his reading had begun at Cambridge if not before. Proust, Joyce and Lawrence were high among his guiding stars. The particular influence of London on White's artistic formation was the immersion it provided him in other art forms. There was always the theatre, especially important since White at that time saw his future as a playwright. He had several scripts in circulation and enjoyed a minor but promising success in the West End, with a short, camp monologue titled *Peter Plover's Party*, performed as part of a longer revue.

But it was music and especially painting that brought rhythm, texture and tonality to his writing. The passages in White that are most divisive, seducing some readers and infuriating others, begin to make sense when thought of as a type of literary cubism. The hallucinatory scenes in *The Aunt's Story*, set in the garden of a French hotel and intended as a harbinger of World War II, are a great example. Characters, names, images, float in and out of consciousness; appearances and surfaces are fractured, leaving underlying forms mysteriously exposed. White explained his process as 'an attempt to come close to the core of reality, the structure of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial'.[21] Painting as a medium suggested models for his own aesthetic, and several of his major texts, including *The Aunt's Story* and the play *The Ham Funeral* were directly inspired by works he had seen in painters' studios.

The Vivisector is White's consummate statement on painters and painting. He wrote in his memoir, *Flaws in the Glass*, that Hurtle Duffield, the artist-protagonist, was a composite character, inspired by various painters he had known over the years.

21 White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 21.

Sidney Nolan is often mentioned, but there were many others. White was a serious collector of paintings and he well understood the challenges of reading them. His genuine engagement with the medium began during his Ebury Street years where, among his neighbours, there was a wild and extravagant young man, English by descent although raised in Ireland. White thought he overdid things with the lipstick, but the friendship between them blossomed and endured.

Francis Bacon had already experienced some success in the early thirties with a painting titled *Crucifixion* being exhibited at the Mayor Gallery and featured in Herbert Read's book *Art Now*.[22] These were promising signs for a precocious but untrained painter. When White first knew Bacon he was designing furniture for a living. White became a client as well as a friend, commissioning various items including a desk he adored. White and Bacon were introduced by Roy de Maistre, an artist who was about twenty years their senior. An eccentric whose many affectations included a royal pedigree, he was, as Marr's biography points out, far more interesting than his confabulations would suggest. As well as having 'a knack of making young and talented men take themselves seriously', he was a formidable painter at his experimental best, although one required by circumstance to produce too many potboilers.[23]

De Maistre was Australian-born and an in-law of White's godmother. White had known of him forever, but they did not meet until the thirties. By this time, de Maistre had resolved never to return to Australia. White's move from Ebury Street around the corner to Ecclestone Street was due to de Maistre, whose patrons included the Tory politician Richard 'RAB' Butler and his wife Sydney (née Courtauld). They purchased the lease on 13 Ecclestone Street for de Maistre to use as his studio-cum-residence. De Maistre sublet the two upper floors to White.[24]

A charming and charismatic figure, de Maistre was a great favourite at country house parties. He had around him a coterie of mainly female admirers who sometimes gathered at his studio. Herbert Read was his most influential supporter among London critics, but this never translated into healthy sales. De Maistre was perpetually hard up. Prior to meeting Lascaris who was his own age, many of White's lovers were older men. He fell heavily in love with de Maistre and for a time they were romantically involved. Bacon too was briefly de Maistre's lover. There is no convincing evidence to confirm speculation that White and Bacon were themselves physically intimate.

De Maistre's enduring influence over both young protegees was as a mentor rather than a lover. In the case of Bacon, this extended to practical tuition in painting. Bacon's metamorphosis from designer to professional painter owes much to de Maistre's guidance. For White, he was equally important.[25] In his abstract work, painted in

22 Daniel Farson, *The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon* (London: Vintage, 1994), 30.
23 Marr, *Patrick White*, 148.
24 Marr, *Patrick White*, 68.
25 Farson, *The Gilded Gutter*, 26–7.

Australia after World War I, de Maistre had explored how perception of sound could be chromatically rendered on canvas. Auditory and visual perception were radically synthesised in this work, a trait that also appears in much of White's writing.

White was forever indebted to de Maistre for his appreciation of art and music. 'I feel he taught me to write by teaching me to look at paintings', White wrote in one of his essays.[26] Through his friendship and tutelage, White developed the confidence to understand the nature of his talent and where it might take him. De Maistre, who had little enthusiasm for the theatre, disapproved of White wasting his time on scripts that no theatre would perform. Slowly, White came to swallow the bitter truth that his love of the stage was unrequited. His future lay in the novel.

Filling the void

By the time he turned forty-six, twenty years of White's life had been spent outside Australia. He presented this statistic in 'The Prodigal Son', a much-quoted essay, written in 1958, about remaining in Australia. He describes the outlook from Castle Hill in characteristically bleak terms.

> In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of the possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes.[27]

He was certainly tempted to join the outgoing traffic: 'It was the exaltation of the "average" that made me panic most.'[28] But one factor that cemented his resolve to stay in Australia was a memory, dating from his London years, of an interview he gave to the Australian journalist Guy Innes after the publication of *Happy Valley*. White recalled how:

> He asked me whether I wanted to go back. I had just 'arrived'; who was I to want to go back? 'Ah, but when you do the colours will come flooding back onto your palette'.[29]

The shrewdness of that observation—and the sheer limits of what he could achieve creatively in Britain—became increasingly apparent to White during the war, in which he served as a Royal Air Force intelligence officer. Perhaps some early career writers will be comforted to hear that even a future Nobel laureate could experience second-novel syndrome. After the critical success of *Happy Valley*, he published *The Living and the Dead* in 1941. The central character is Eliot Standish, a writer living on

26 Patrick White, 'In the Making' in *Patrick White Speaks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 20.
27 White, 'The Prodigal Son', 15.
28 White, 'The Prodigal Son', 15.
29 White, 'The Prodigal Son', 6.

Ebury Street with his mother and sister. Set entirely in England, it was intended as a Londoner's riposte to Joyce's Dublin. Realising how far short it fell of this ambition, White came to regard it as the least-favourite of his books.

Reading it recently, I was impressed at how the colour in the novel is indeed more dead than living. To say that the atmospherics are black and white would be generous; it's more a case of shades of brown. London could never disappear as a location in White's fiction—too many of his characters lead transnational lives. But *The Living and the Dead* shows that as a setting it could not in itself support the aesthetic complexity and psychological intensity that are there in the best of White's writing. The reason for this is something of an enigma, for he continued to adore the city and its theatre, visiting often when he became successful. But by the time the war broke out in 1939, he was exhausted: with the city itself and with the rich, insular, homosexual scene that had been his milieu for several years.

By his own account, Australia began to assert its presence ever more insistently as the full scale of the war became apparent. Even the Blitz, which he experienced directly in its first wild nights, brought a vicarious journey through the landscape he had internalised as a child. With London under fire, he sat in his bedroom transfixed by the journal of the explorer Edward John Eyre.[30] Both Eyre and the German romantic-cum-explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt, were inspirations for Voss, his explorer anti-hero who would stride into world literature in 1957. As the carnage of the war continued, London for White began to represent an 'actual and spiritual graveyard'. As he contemplated his own future, he saw with increasing dread 'the prospect of ceasing to be an artist and turning instead into that most sterile of things, a London intellectual'.[31]

So, for better or worse, he and Lascaris sailed south. 'Even the boredom and frustration presented avenues for endless exploration; even the ugliness, the bags of iron of Australian life, acquired a meaning', he wrote.[32] The discords he struck in emptying and fossicking through those bags of metal are at the heart of his truth-telling.

Nation without nationalism

The Australia known to Patrick White was an ancient continent and a fledgling nation. The federation was just ten years old at the time of his birth; forty-seven when he settled there after the war. White arrived 'home' in Australia 'determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism'.[33] His immodest ambition was to assert himself as *the* novelist

30 White, 'The Prodigal Son', 13.
31 White, 'The Prodigal Son', 14.
32 White, 'The Prodigal Son', 16–17.
33 White, 'The Prodigal Son', 16.

of the country. But, unlike so many who have entertained that conceit, White was no nationalist. That put him at odds with a very large faction in the local literary scene, which was often at a loss as to what to do with him.

Like Faulkner, Joyce, and so many of the major moderns, White brought an international perspective to mining the local. He loved gossip and was an acute observer of humanity. A dedicated user of public transport, his finely tuned ear could distil poetry from the thorns and thistles of the Australian vernacular. In White's plays as well as his prose, it is often the most inarticulate utterances that yield the most meaning. With an all-too-finite vocab in their existential toolkit, his characters grapple, Beckett-like, with the enormity around them.

White's capacity for bathos was formidable—and seldom more punishing than in his attitude to nationhood and the sacred cows that chew around its base. Speaking in 1984, he argued that 'those with genuine love of their heritage have begun to wonder whether nationalism, in its overheated fuzz of artificially inseminated patriotism, is all that desirable'.[34] His aversion to Australian jingoism deepened in tandem with his growing concern for the land's first owners, about whom he gradually became better informed.

I suspect that White's supranational outlook and his caution in even classifying himself as 'an Australian' are among the reasons why he has receded from view, at least in his own country. He was near the end of his life in 1988 when Australia threw its birthday party to commemorate the two hundred years since British arrival. Appalled that a date so unholy for Indigenous Australians could be officially celebrated, White prohibited the publication or performance of his work for the entire bicentennial year. 'More than anything, it was the need for justice for the Aborigines which put me against the Bi', he explained. 'Aborigines may not be shot and poisoned as they were in the early days of colonisation, but there are subtler ways of disposing of them.'[35]

In the decades since 'the Bi', Australia Day has not diminished as many of us who protested against it had hoped. Instead it has boomed like a mushroom cloud, morphing into an increasingly grotesque display of national chauvinism and white pride. Patrick White's assessment that the possessors of the nation are themselves deeply dispossessed at a spiritual and psychological level remains as pertinent as it is unwelcome in the prevailing political discourse.

The Australian emptiness that White hoped to populate is, of course, an inner state, a self stripped bare. And while it required a specific geography to give it symbolic form, it is ultimately a human—not a national—condition that he was trying to describe and understand. That idea of peopling the void through language is there in all the major novels: *The Tree of Man*, *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Solid Mandala*,

34 Patrick White, 'Patriotism' in *Patrick White Speaks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 141.
35 Patrick White, 'The Bicentenary' *Patrick White Speaks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 183–4.

The Vivisector, to name a few. For White, the relationship between the inner self and the shell that is the body is as abrasive as it is sublime. Perhaps that's why it required the liminal geography of a place like Castle Hill, landed somewhere between the bush and the outer suburbs, to get the corpus rolling.

Patrick White v. 'Killer Kramer'

I first delved into White's writing when I was a student at the University of Sydney in the mid-1980s, sampling a few of the short stories. My strongest, and certainly undergraduate, impression was of the earthiness of the writing: the vulgar ratbaggery of Sarsaparilla, with its crazed loners, mongrel dogs and scarcely less feral children. There is a gentle humour and a deep compassion to White's portrayal of 'the underprivileged', and while he created some truly great upper-crust characters, he could be especially savage towards his own class. This must have irritated Leonie Kramer, who held the chair of Australian literature at Sydney. She was also the head of the English Department at that time. A dame of the British Empire, she ruled in imperial style.

'Killer Kramer', as he dubbed her, was famously no friend of White, whose increasingly leftist politics were diametrically opposed to her own. She favoured the poetry of James McAuley and A. D. Hope, both professors of English (the latter from Canberra). In the closing line of an infamous review, Hope had described *The Tree of Man* as 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge'.[36] As a more recent critic has pointed out, the review was not quite as bad as this much-quoted phrase suggests. Moreover, there were many other reviewers equally unable to cope with White's ambitious makeover of the Australian novel.[37] White never forgave Hope for the review and Kramer never softened in her hostility towards him. Fortunately for us undergraduates, Ivor Indyk had been recently recruited to the department. His lectures on *Voss* as an example of irony were outstanding. Elizabeth Webby, then an associate professor, also included White in her course on Australian drama. Recalling that moment, Indyk has said that Kramer's resistance to White and to other progressive voices, including a number of Indigenous writers, was known by all. The syllabus for each course had to be approved by a committee she chaired. To her credit, she acknowledged the academic freedom of staff, although she must have gritted her teeth when signing some of the approvals.[38]

Voss is striking for the density of its observational detail and its rhythmic texture. There is an operatic extravagance to the character of both Voss and his romantic interest, Laura Trevelyan, with whom he enjoys something resembling telepathic communication as he marches through the wilderness. You can smell and taste the country traversed by Voss's expedition, yet there are only faint nods to the naturalism

36 A. D. Hope, 'The Bunyip Stages a Comeback', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 1956, 15.

37 John Barnes, 'Australia's Prodigal Son', in *Patrick White Centenary: The Legacy of a Prodigal Son*, ed. Cynthia vanden Driesen and Bill Ashcroft (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 16.

38 Ivor Indyk, personal communication, 22 July 2022.

that, in White's day, was the default mode of nearly all Australian fiction. The portrayal of Voss's quest to discover inland Australia is sweetly ironic and adroitly calibrated to a world that in the 1950s was nominally struggling to decolonise. Voss's one-way journey into the desert leads him not to the anticipated enlightenment of discovery but to the excesses of his own hubris, which ultimately destroy him.

In his evocation of Voss's monomania and narcissism, White examines how exploration is not so much a process of observation but an act of projection on the part of the expedition leader. To interrogate the 'heroics' of exploring may not seem especially original today, when statues of imperial figures are being ripped down in many parts of the world. But White was well ahead of the game. He made the point in 1957, nearly forty years before postcolonial critics 'discovered' similar fault lines in the exploration project. Needless to say, they did not describe them with anything approximating White's complexity or poetic force.

For those of us convinced by the power of White's writing, he remains as relevant as ever despite the passage of more than thirty years. David Marr has no doubt that White will again resurface as a must-read author, but he suggests that a period in the shade is almost to be expected for novelists who have died in recent decades, even the greats. It takes time to read the big books; and time for so many of us is in short supply. Understandably, living writers get press and critical attention. The novel as an artform is in rude health, with more good books being published than anyone can read.

Another reason White is less read than he should be is to do with political changes. The identity-based politics that presently absorb so much oxygen would have bored White rigid. His own political awakening was, as he confessed, heavily retarded. He began as a political agnostic and evolved into an interventionist. Like Lascaris, he regretted that he took so long to recognise the obscenity of fascism, despite having visited Germany under Hitler. On first returning to Australia after the war, for many years he voted unthinkingly for conservative candidates, as Whites had done for generations. The 1960s changed everything. With actual experience of war under his belt, he had good reason to revile it, whether hot or cold. When Gough Whitlam became leader of the Australian Labor Party, promising an end to imperial kowtowing and the withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam, White supported him wholeheartedly. In 1975 he protested vociferously against the sacking of Whitlam's government by the Queen's representative.

Politics and poetics

White's speeches and other public interventions on subjects ranging from nuclear disarmament to urban conservation are sufficiently numerous to fill a volume titled *Patrick White Speaks* (1990). A noticeable absence in its pages is gay rights. Despite being one of the most prominent out-of-the-closet gay men in the country, this was

one flag he refused to fly. He viewed sexuality as an essentially private matter, and Marr can remember him chiding the Mardi Gras crowd for 'walking up Oxford Street with your handbags'.[39] Perhaps White had thought too much about the depths of human identity to be much interested in political labelling:

> I see myself not so much a homosexual as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to actual situations or the characters I become in my writing.[40]

Perhaps, for White, the assertion of an identity politics ran the risk of reproducing tribalism in another form. More than is generally recognised, his own politics were grounded in concern about economic injustice. He enjoyed a materially privileged existence as he knew well enough. It is said that, by the end of his life, the lion's share of his income was going to philanthropic causes. Unlike many who are born into money, White thought long and hard about the fortune of his own family and the great richness of the land that yielded such prosperity, but at such a price. The cult of wealth that he so despised was especially alive-and-well in Sydney, which has always exhibited an unwholesome blend of glitz, sparkle, sleaze and opportunism; it is a city where the homeless rummage 'in garbage bins among the lobster and oyster shells', as White himself inimitably put it.[41]

To return to the issue with which I started, why *is* White so little read? To be more specific, why is he neglected in the country that was very much his own (despite his protests to the contrary)? A possible answer is that Australia, as is often pointed out, is a practical country, guaranteed to deliver if you want to build a fence, swimming pool, coal mine or public lavatory. So it is especially noticeable that in a straightforward, practical, nuts-and-bolts way, Australia neglects the presence of Patrick White in the landscape he frequented. He's out there, but only to the slenderest degree is he part of the material fabric of our lives.

I feel this personally, having grown up in north-west Sydney in a house that was only seven kilometres from Showground Road. We lived not in Castle Hill but in the adjoining suburb of West Pennant Hills. White and Lascaris moved out of Dogwoods the year I was born, so I did not unknowingly pass them at the local shops. But the fact remains that I was brought up in Sarsaparilla or near enough to it. The striking thing is that no-one told me at the time and I never worked it out for myself until long after the happy day when I made my exit.

Compare Australia and White with the relationship between localities and their writers that is common in Britain. Whether it's Austen-and-Bath or Dickens-and-London or Woolf-and-Bloomsbury, or Hardy-and-Wessex, authors and places are connected. They speak to one another. There are guidebooks, plaques and rituals of

39 Marr, interview.
40 White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 80–1.
41 Patrick White, 'Patriotism', 141.

visitation that connect literary works with their geographical origins. At their worst, these practices can encourage thoughtless genuflection to the cult of the author. But at their best, they provide a way of physically engaging with the creative works that bring meaning to our lives. A cottage industry of guided tours and history walks supports these enthusiasms. That's very different from growing up in Sarsaparilla and not knowing it.

Dogwoods on Showground Road is now home to a legal firm. You can look at the house from the footpath, but if you seek a reminder of its past, turn to the street-map not the streetscape. As was predicted in the concluding pages of *The Tree of Man*, the tide of suburbia flooded Sarsaparilla and eventually drowned it. In the now subdivided land that White and Lascaris once tilled, there is a trilogy of street names that may or may not mean much to those who live there: Patrick Ave, White Place and Nobel Place. But change, it seems, is in the air. A notice on the Heritage NSW website reports that Dogwoods will soon be getting a blue plaque declaring its place in literary history.[42]

The house on Martin Road at Centennial Park has received greater recognition, with the New South Wales government classifying it as a site of heritage significance, perhaps in hope of quietening a chorus of White admirers who, after Lascaris's death, argued that the state should acquire it as a writers' centre or museum. This was deemed unaffordable and the house sold at auction.

White's childhood residence, Lulworth, is now a nursing home and in that guise it still has tales to tell. How poignant that Lascaris, who outlived White by thirteen years, spent the last three months of his life in that institution. Another late-life resident was White's old foe, Dame Leonie Kramer!

In the real estate bubble of Sydney, the notion that a building has heritage value is as heretical as any other encumbrance to a developer's right to knock it down. Blue plaques in themselves won't get people reading *The Eye of the Storm* or *The Tree of Man*. They are demanding books. But here and there they might play some small role in encouraging a culture that is genuinely curious about places and the ideas they spawn. White was fully cognisant of the danger and irresponsibility of failing to plumb the depths of the world we occupy. 'A pragmatic nation, we tend to confuse reality with surfaces. Perhaps this dedication to surface is why we are constantly fooled by the crooks who mostly govern us.'[43]

42 'Patrick White: Author and Nobel Laureate (1912–1990)', Heritage NSW, Blue Plaques Program, accessed 10 July 2023, blueplaques.nsw.gov.au/blue-plaques/locations/patrick-white.
43 White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 128.

White could never get used to Australia as a national or political system. Too many crooks. Too much bad blood and unsettled business. But as a location, it breathed inside him. During the war, in the Western Desert of Egypt, he was overwhelmed by memories of:

> frosty mornings on the Monaro, with sulphur-crested cockatoos toppling the stooked oats; floodwaters of the Barwon and Namoi through which I swam my horse to fetch the mail; the peppertrees and cracked asphalt of steamy Sydney streets.[44]

Summoned back to Australia by these impressions, he brought with him the carapaces of memory borne by all true travellers. As images from afar continued to resonate, Castle Hill became *somewhere* for him and Lascaris. There is a trace of London in the Castle Hill they knew. There is Roy de Maistre and the lipstick smile of Francis Bacon. There are bombs falling on London and the caress of the beautiful soldier, lost to history. Without those ties to elsewhere, the Castle Hill in which White lived could only be Castle Hill. It could never have become Sarsaparilla.

White populated the local with a world of connections. This too says something about why he is being ignored and why we need him now. I am not the first to observe that the recent pandemic presented a mirror that revealed some good and much that is ugly. The lockdown prohibition on making flesh-and-blood connections took its toll—and its aftershocks continue with an even greater dependence on the digital flow of information. 'No man is an island', a poet once said, but the insularity demanded of us has proven stubbornly difficult to discard. Relishing their walls and lines and checkpoints, the Little America of Trumpism and the insularity of Brexit have landed us with the infrastructure of the xenophobe. The very union of the United Kingdom is uncertain to a degree that never seemed possible. In Australia, as the federation atomised into states and territories, all struggling to avoid contamination from without, we saw previously invisible boundaries become suddenly uncrossable. The unnaturalness of all this needs to be recognised. At a certain basic level, it makes no sense. Hence the need to understand the ways in which nations do *not* define us. In seeking that objective, we might draw inspiration and a little solace from a brilliant, reluctant and sometimes cantankerous Australian who happened to be a Londoner at heart.

44 Patrick White, 'Patriotism', 296.

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